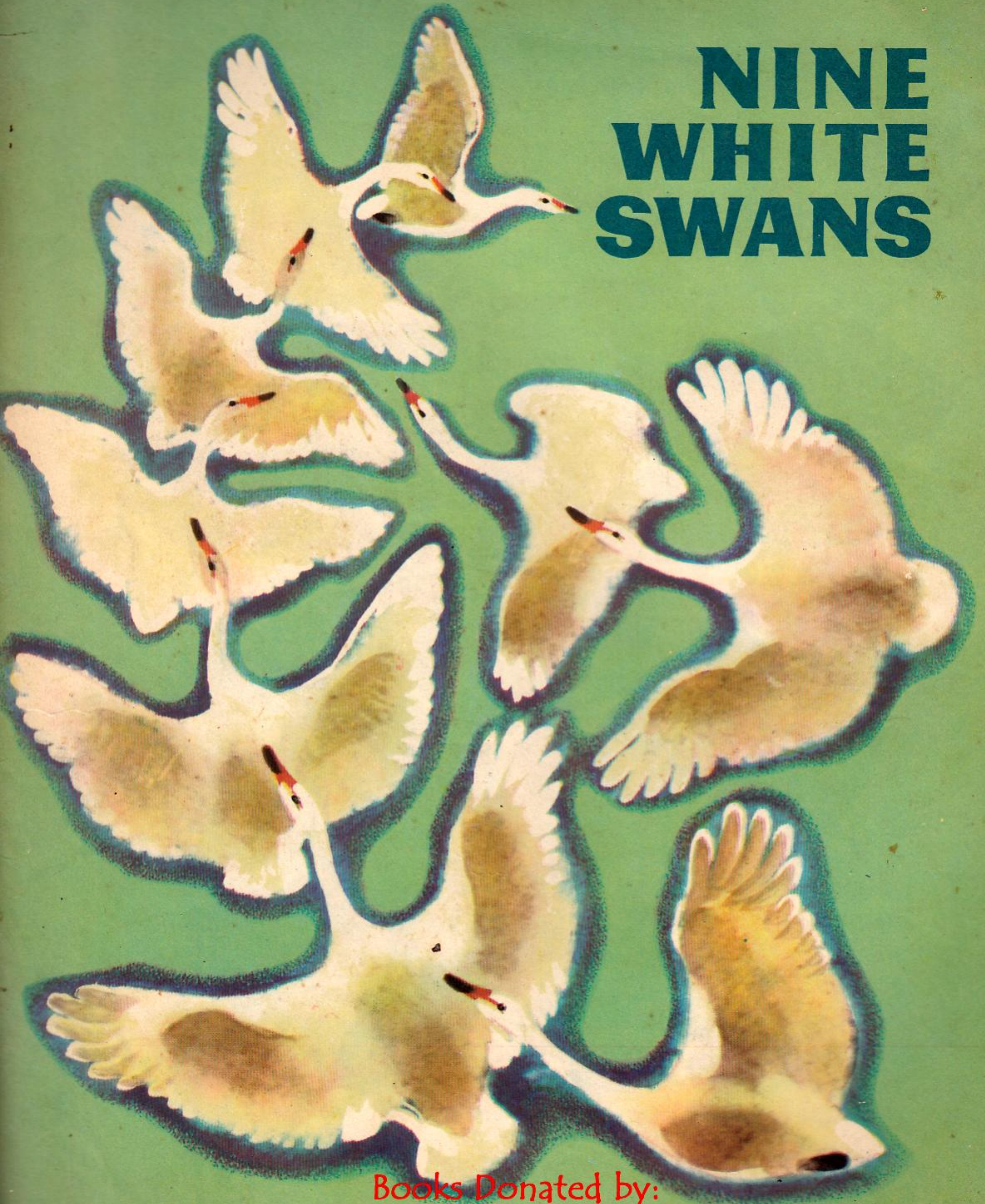


S E R G E I V O R O N I N

NINE WHITE SWANS



Books Donated by:
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1

Now, as it had every year before, spring came to Lake Chudskoye. The snow began to melt on the vast surface of the lake, running along the smooth ice in rivulets, disappearing through the cracks. The snow water made the cracks bigger, and the sun was its greatest helper. Then came the warm south wind to chase the ice floes and make a large mirror of clear water in which the blue sky and light clouds were reflected.

All at once flocks of gulls began to circle over the lake. They were soon joined by a flock of ducks. Soon the ducks were diving, swimming and preening themselves. Then, all froze motionlessly.

A loud honking of swans could be heard from on high. The large white birds were dipping lower and lower. Their wings spread wide and barely moving, they touched the water. Soon they were floating on the lake, their necks arched proudly.

The ducks moved off to keep out of their way, while the gulls circled overhead more excitedly, their cries shriller than before as they greeted the swans' arrival.

The two most beautiful swans had both hatched here. They had returned to their native parts to build their nest and hatch their own cygnets. Now Whitedown, the great swan, called to Fleetwing, his mate, "Ang...Ang," which meant: "Our journey is over. We are home at last."

"Ang...Ang..." Fleetwing called back. And this meant: "I am so happy to be home."

2

Whitedown swam boldly along the wide channel in rushes. He was heading for a small islet hidden by the marsh grass and reeds. The islet was no bigger than a table, yet it was big enough to hold a nest.

"Ang...Ang," Whitedown said. Fleetwing understood. He had been born here and this was where he wanted their nest to be.

"Ang...Ang," she replied. Yes, she liked this islet and she was sure that no one would come upon their nest here.

The channel they had come by led from Lake Chudskoye to a large bay. There was a village at the far end of the bay. Whitedown knew of the village. He wanted to see if it was really far enough away and held no danger for them.

There were clouds of gnats over the reeds. Butterflies chased each other merrily. A musk-rat swam by carrying a small branch in its mouth. Fish splashed about. As Whitedown's broad chest forced the reeds apart he looked about and decided there really was no danger threatening here.



Suddenly a shot rang out!

A second later something began to thrash about at the bank's edge. Whitedown bent his neck and head close to the water to keep out of sight. He stopped breathing and remained very still. Not until all was quiet again and the snapping of branches and noise was off to a side did he dare look out. He saw a man in high rubber boots. He was carrying a large pike. A shotgun was slung over his shoulder.

When Whitedown returned to their islet he said nothing to Fleetwing, for he did not want to frighten her. Together they began building their nest.

It was a large, roomy nest lined with straight reeds. Fleetwing laid seven big greenish eggs in it and was now sitting on the eggs. Whitedown stood watch over the nest. He would not let any bird or beast approach, not even a tiny songbird. When a young and inexperienced musk-rat came swimming up one day he pecked it so hard it nearly drowned from fright. Never again did the musk-rat dare swim by Whitedown's nest.

At times Fleetwing would become restless from sitting on the eggs for so long and then Whitedown would try to amuse her. He would do somersaults in the water, or lay on his back and kick the air in the funniest way. At other times he would swim right up to the nest, arch his long neck and begin to croon, "Ang...Ang...Ang...Ang...".



He would sound each "Ang" in a different tone. This meant: "I love you very much. Our little ones will soon hatch. Then we shall leave the nest and go back to the lake. The lake is as big as a sea. Nothing will threaten us there. We shall swim and float on the waves. And our children will be with us."

Fleetwing listened to his song. Then she replied in a gentle and tired voice, "Yes, I would love to swim. I am so tired of sitting on the nest. I know the babies will hatch soon. And then we can go back to Lake Chudskoye.... But something frightens me...."

"Do not fear. We are safely hidden," Whitedown said to calm her. Yet, he was thinking of the man who had shot the pike.

4

The cygnets hatched on a stormy night. Streaks of lightning flashed across the great black sky. Thunder rolled overhead. The rain came down in torrents. Fleetwing hid her head under her wing, but she could still see the flashes of lightning.

Then, in the middle of this terrible storm, she suddenly felt the first cygnet move under her stomach, amidst the warm down. "Ang...Ang..." she said to Whitedown, who sat by her side. And this meant: "One has hatched. He is alive and warm."

Whitedown moved closer to her side, to shield her from the rain and wind.

Soon after the second cygnet hatched and crawled right under his mother's wing. He was joined by a third. Towards morning, when the storm had died down, when the clouds had vanished and the sun was rising, all seven cygnets were safely snuggled under their mother's wings.

Fleetwing rose, shifted her weight carefully, and left the nest. Whitedown, who had been waiting anxiously for this day, now saw his children.

They were little balls of fluff. Each one was opening wide its yellow bill.

"Ang...Ang," Whitedown said. This meant: "How fine they look!" He began stroking their backs with his bill, smoothing their ruffled down, caressing them. Fleetwing flapped her wings nearby as she swam and preened herself. She was in no hurry to return to the nest, for her main task was over.

The sun beat down more warmly. The cygnets, happy at its warmth, stood up on their wobbly legs, flapped their tiny wings and peeped hungrily.

"Don't be so impatient," Whitedown said to them. "As soon as you're dry I'll take you to eat. I've found a very good place."

All of a sudden his blood turned cold.

Someone was coming along the channel in the reeds, heading straight for the nest. "Is it the man who shot the pike?" Whitedown wondered and glanced at Fleetwing. Her brown eyes were terror-stricken. If not for the babies Whitedown and Fleetwing would have soon vanished in the reeds. But they could not abandon their children.





The sloshing steps were getting ever closer!

Whitedown rushed forward to meet the danger head-on and divert the terrible man from his nest. He was flying right at the noise when he nearly collided with the long, hard legs of an elk. Luckily, it was only an old elk crossing the channel to the other side.

The family was not ready to set out for Lake Chudskoye for a while yet. For many days Fleetwing carried her babies on her back. For many nights they huddled together under her wings. Now, at last, they were big enough to swim in single file behind their father, with Fleetwing bringing up the rear. She had a good view of her seven children and was happy to see how well they paddled.

They left the channel on a foggy morning so that no one would spot them. By the time the sun rose and the fog lifted they had reached Lake Chudskoye.

The cygnets were amazed at the great open spaces ahead and at the choppy waves. They began frolicking, splashing, chasing each other like tiny speedboats and then would stop to bob up and down on the waves beside their parents.

There were boats far away, where the sky met the water. Gulls circled overhead. Waves came up in even rows from some distant place. The swans were moving farther and farther away from the shore.

Whitedown wanted his children to love this vast lake with its clear waters and the feeling of space all around.

"Ang...Ang," he clacked. The cygnets understood him. They were overcome by the sunshine and blue water and begged their father to take them farther and farther away, to where the sky and water met.

"That is a place we can never reach, not even by flying," he replied. "And why should we go there if we are so happy here? Besides, it is time for us to turn back. Our food is in shallow water. Come, let us go back."





Ever since that day they often swam out to the deepest parts of the lake. And each time the cygnets discovered something new.

They learned that Lake Chudskoye is not always sunny and pleasant. It can be very harsh at times. Then great white-capped waves come crashing down, whipped on by a strong wind. Al-

though there was nothing dangerous about the waves when they were out on the lake, they still had to keep from having a wave wash over them. There were times when they couldn't go out on the lake at all, for a storm would be raging and the wind would be fierce.

Ah, but how wonderful it was after the storm had ended and the wind had died down, when all was still, when there were no heavy clouds to hide the sun. Then they would swim on and on into the blue haze, rising and falling with the smooth waves.

6

Early one morning, when the sun was just rising over Lake Chudskoye, Whitedown said "Ang...Ang," to his grown children. This meant:

"Listen closely, children. You are quite big now. You must grow strong, while your mother and I need to rest. Learn to fly very well. Practice flying as much as you can. You must be strong and hardy. We don't want you to miss us. When the cold winds come and the leaves fall from the trees we shall call you. Then we will all fly south together. Meanwhile, grow strong. You must be ready for our long flight when the time comes."

Then Whitedown began beating the water with his great wings. Suddenly his feet appeared and he seemed to take a few running steps over the water, with spray rising on all sides. And then he was in the air and flying!

"Ang...Ang," Fleetwing said. "Watch your father carefully. That is how you must fly. Try it, all of you!"

Then all seven young swans began flapping their wings, running over the water, faster and faster until they were airborne.

Fleetwing flew behind them.

"Kiilkli!" came their father's voice.

They understood his command and formed a wedge, flying towards the place where the water meets the sky.

Whitedown was rising higher and higher.



All at once they could see so far and wide that all seven cried joyously: “Kiilkli! Kiilkli! How wonderful to have been born here, on this beautiful lake! It is tremendous! It is filled with sunlight! It is our lake! It is our home!”

“Kiilkli! Kiilkli!” the young swans cried.

Whitedown and Fleetwing listened to their young voices. They knew that no matter where their children would spend the cold winter months, they would always return in spring to their wonderful lake, to the lake where they were born and had grown into such great, beautiful, strong white swans.





TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY FAINNA GLAGOLEVA

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С. ВОРОНИН

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